

PMFO Tip Sheet

Ideas for Your Annual Self-Assessment Process

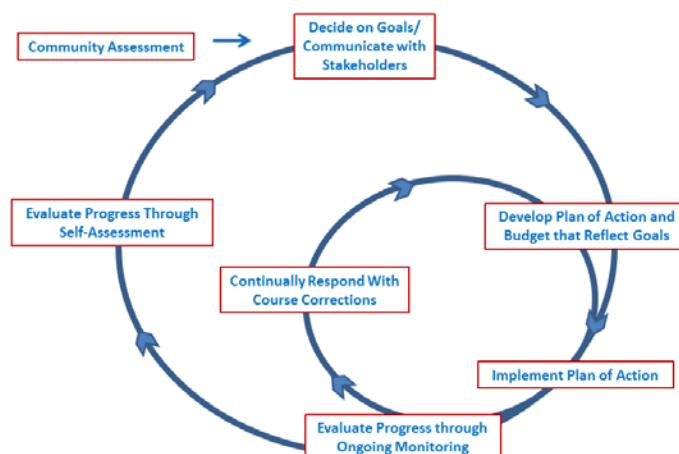
In a few months, the National Center on Program Management and Fiscal Operations (PMFO) will release a new suite of tools to support programs in conducting their Annual Self-Assessment. The tools will reflect the Office of Head Start's (OHS) latest thinking on the role of the Annual Self-Assessment in ongoing program oversight and planning. As a preview, we've pulled together several ideas for programs that are in the midst of conducting this year's assessment so that they can begin to think about transitioning to this new approach to the Annual Self-Assessment.

The Annual Self-Assessment is a long-standing element of the Head Start program calendar. Congress affirmed the importance of the process in the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 when it articulated the need for every Head Start grantee and delegate agency to conduct a comprehensive self-assessment of its effectiveness at least annually.^{i ii} OHS sees the Annual Self-Assessment as a crucial element in a grantee's role in providing effective oversight.

Over the years, programs have conducted self-assessments in a variety of ways that range from adapting a federal monitoring tool to using materials specifically designed for self-assessments. Whatever the instrument selected, programs that conduct meaningful self-assessments include a number of specific practices, such as involving the Policy Council and community members; thoroughly reviewing data; and developing recommendations for growth, improvement, and new directions. Recent PMFO workshops and focus groups revealed that program leaders from across the country continue to use these time-tested practices and that they are experimenting with new approaches that 1) take full advantage of all of the data they have already collected and 2) streamline their self-assessment process. Program leaders have also told us that the Program Planning Cycle graphic (below) has provided them with new insights into how the Annual Self-Assessment informs and strengthens their program's annual planning process. In the tips below we've incorporated some of these innovations and insights along with tried and true practices.

Program Planning Cycle

The inner circle of this graphic represents the ongoing monitoring that is part of the larger cycle of continuous improvement. The outer circle represents key aspects of the Self-Assessment.



Prepare by strengthening existing data systems.

Head Start programs collect a massive amount of data about virtually every aspect of program operations throughout the year. When they strengthen the systems that gather this data, programs gain increased confidence because they know that their data is reliable and provides an accurate picture of their program.

Programs are preparing for their Annual Self-Assessment process throughout the year as they collect data and remain alert to the story it is telling. The Annual Self-Assessment then creates the ideal time for programs to examine that data—what they have been gathering during the course of the year, through multiple years, and across different data sets—to uncover patterns or trends that may not be evident through the ongoing monitoring process. Programs use ongoing monitoring to ask, “Are we doing things right (and on time)?” However, they use the Annual Self-Assessment to ask, “Are we doing the right things?”

Ongoing Monitoring:

Are we doing things right?

Self-Assessment:

Are we doing the right things?

The Annual Self-Assessment also provides the opportunity for the program to look for consistent data messages from across all areas of operation. However, rather than overwhelm the Self-Assessment team with every piece of data that they collect, effective programs identify the sources of data that best represent the reality of their program. They can begin to determine which of their data they should share with the Self-Assessment team by asking the following kinds of questions:

- Which data highlight our strengths?
- Which data suggest areas of concerns?
- What do the data tell us about our progress in meeting goals?
- Are there patterns across data sources that we need to attend to?

View the Annual Self-Assessment as a time to focus on the “big” issues.

Throughout the year, program leaders and staff continually track the effectiveness of program operations and progress towards goals through their ongoing monitoring system. During the Annual Self-Assessment, staff, leaders, parents, and partners reflect on that same data and compare data across content areas to address higher-level systemic issues. By asking pertinent questions—such as “How can we better serve children and families in our community?” “Where are we at risk?” and “How can we improve or streamline operations?”—programs can critically examine the overall direction and impact of their systems and services. Through this examination they can then determine if they are using their human and financial resources to achieve their goals.

Use parents, community members, and partners as “fresh sets of eyes.”

Congress requires Head Start programs to involve their Policy Council in the Annual Self-Assessment; however, that legislative body also recommends that programs involve community members, thus ensuring an outside perspective. Parents and community partners can provide new insights as they work with program leaders to examine data. Governing body members may be recruited as well. In particular, the governing body Early Childhood expert can add value to the review of educational services, while the governing body fiscal expert can critique financial systems.

Let the data lead the way.

Head Start’s array of services is too complex and its environment too fluid to allow programs to rest on their accomplishments. An honest review of program data typically points to a variety of ways that programs can improve, make adjustments, or change direction. In some cases, the Self-Assessment team may conclude that a particular service needs to be re-tooled to meet a need that has been newly revealed by child and family data; in other cases, team members may conclude that management systems need a tune-up. In programs where systems and services are working well, the Self-Assessment team may suggest areas for innovation.

Effective Self-Assessment teams draw conclusions from the review of program data and use those conclusions to direct program leaders to 1) immediately correct any issues in services or systems they identify and 2) recommend new directions—program, fiscal, T/TA, and school readiness—to the program’s planning team.

Summarize the effort.

The Annual Self-Assessment process is not complete until the hard work of the team is summarized in a report that can be shared with the governing body, the Policy Council, program staff, and the funder. While there is currently no required length or format for the report, feedback from Head Start and Early Head Start programs as well as Regional Program Specialists suggests that a meaningful Annual Self-Assessment summary report should do the following:

- List the members of the Self-Assessment team with their titles.
- Briefly describe the process the team used.
- Indicate the data sources the team reviewed.
- Report the findings that the data revealed.
- Share the conclusions the team reached.
- Summarize the team’s recommendations for program improvement.

Continue the cycle.

Because the Annual Self-Assessment is part of a cyclical planning process, the end of one year’s assessment marks the beginning of next year’s planning. When the Policy Council and governing body approve the Annual Self-Assessment report, program leaders and staff convert the Self-Assessment team’s new directions into goals and objectives; they then devise plans for meeting those new goals and objectives.

As they develop the plans that emerge from the Self-Assessment team’s direction—plans for the program, for school readiness, and for T/TA—program leaders take care to ensure that the objectives and activities in each plan align with those of the other plans.

Example:

If the Self-Assessment team recommends a focus on improving or expanding services to children who are dual language learners, the program may adopt the following:

- School readiness activities such as a Planned Language Approach that intentionally and systematically supports children’s language and literacy development and increased competency in their home language while developing proficiency in English.
- Program activities that focus on selection of classroom language models based on language of teachers and of the children, which may involve hiring additional classroom staff who speak children’s home languages and working together with families to best support their children’s learning and development through appropriate strategies and activities at home.

T/TA activities that include professional development for classroom and family services staff on not only understanding and communicating the importance of home language development as children learn English, but also on approaches and strategies for supporting children’s language acquisition in both home language and English.

As programs develop their new plans, they also must determine if they need to collect new types of data through ongoing monitoring to 1) track their success in implementing their new goals and 2) later assess the impact of the goals through the following year’s Annual Self-Assessment. This development phase is the ideal time for the program to identify for the coming year the new questions that they would like answered during the next Annual Self-Assessment.

Sample Question for Dual Language Learning:

Have we successfully implemented activities to support children who are dual language learners? Have children’s language and literacy outcomes improved?

The program’s Federal and Technical Assistance staff can assist in identifying resources to support accomplishment of new goals. For example, in the dual language learner example above, the program may decide that the interactive Program Preparedness Checklist or A Planned Language Approach resource (developed by the National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness) would provide valuable information to supplement the data they already collect through classroom observations and review of family records.

Finally, with goals, objectives, activities, and data collection plans in place, the program begins the implementation and data collection tasks that set the stage for a new year of ongoing monitoring and self-assessment activities. The cycle of continuous improvement is complete—and begins again.

ⁱ 45 CFR 1304.51(i)(1). Head Start Program Performance Standards and Program Guidance. 2006. English.

ⁱⁱ Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 (PL 110-134). HHS/ACF/OHS. 2008. English.